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Education for children with special needs in the Flemish community of Belgium: side effects of the current educational integration system

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ABSTRACT

While the Flemish education sector has begun to evolve alongside international developments towards more inclusive types of education for children with special needs, the segregated special school remains the dominant model and a valued type of education in Flanders. An advantage of the Flemish system is that parents of children with special needs are currently able to choose the educational setting that is most suitable for their children: integrated education or special education. This choice is however complex as our research results show that the patterns of choice are determined systematically by the social position of the family of the child; besides the influence of other characteristics like type and severity of the disability and age of the child. The initiatives for integrated education implemented to date in the Flemish community of Belgium appear to rely heavily on the capacities of the families with the result that families in stronger socio-cultural and socioeconomic positions are best able to cope in integrated education. At the same time, there remains an overrepresentation of vulnerable families in segregated specialist education. We concluded that policies aimed at increasing equality serve to exacerbate the embedded structural social inequalities.

Keywords: child with special needs, special needs education, integrated education, social position, educational inequality, Flanders

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1. Introduction

The development of social policies for people with disabilities is an important challenge in modern welfare states. The conceptual basis of the citizenship model has triggered many policy changes in the disability sector, whose history reads as an incremental evolution from supply-oriented care towards demand-oriented care. There is a growing focus on individual needs and the demands of the person with the disability, reflecting the new importance of empowerment and individual choice. At the same time the educational sector is undergoing changes regarding children with special educational needs. The general and universal right to education has been well established for some time. The 1994 UNESCO Salamanca Statement affirmed international agreement regarding this principle, and emphasises the notion that children with disabilities should be taught in the mainstream schools attended by their non-disabled peers. The global educational landscape has further been shaped by the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006), the International Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), the European Disability Strategy 2010-2020 and the Council of Europe Action Plan to promote the rights and full participation of people with disabilities in society 2006-2015 (European Commission, 2013). In this way, an evolution occurred away from the psycho-medical model, in which special interventions for children with a disability are central, towards a sociological vision of inclusion in which children with a disability are granted the opportunity to participate in general education settings. The progress towards greater use of mainstream placements is evident in the majority of developed countries. Although the first inclusive education initiatives were developed in the early 1960s, many European education laws were not actually changed until the late 1990s or the early years of the present century (Ebersold, 2011; NESSE, 2012).

Despite these changes, however, the commitment to education for all is not necessarily linked to obligatory mainstream education for all children with disabilities. The development of education and school systems has differed from country to country, and many states have experienced difficulty establishing inclusive education systems. Special schools continue to exist in many countries, though investment in resources varies (European Agency of special needs and inclusive education, 2012; Eurydice, 2005). Some countries emphasise the principle right of parents to choose the school in which their child is educated (Ebersold, 2011).

When children with special needs and their parents are able to choose between segregated special education and inclusive education, factors affecting this choice include the country's education system and the

educational 'career'¹, as well as the characteristics and competencies of the family and their social network. First, the type and development of the education system and the distribution of incentives (funding, transport, means) across schools and users all affect the choice of particular types of education (e.g., Meijer, 1999; Meijer, 2003; Ebersold, 2011). Second, the influence of the educational 'career' (Pescosolido, 2001) implies that choosing a type of school is part of a multi-phase process that is influenced by past decisions, experiences, guidance and support services (e.g., Eurydice, 2005; Vislie, 2003; Meijer, 2003; Ruelens, Dehandschutter, Ghesquière, & Douterlungne, 2007; Sebrechts, 2012). Third, children with special needs are often steered into particular types of education depending on the characteristics and socioeconomic situations of their families (e.g., Roulstone & Prideaux, 2012; Szumski & Karwowski, 2012; Sebrechts, 2012).

Having the opportunity to choose a school for a child with special educational needs makes it possible to select the educational setting that can provide the best support to the child according to the type and the severity of the disability (the principle of the least restrictive environment described by Heward (2009)). However, the allocation to and choice for individual forms of education is much more complex, as described above. New measures that support this choice could actually create more inequality between families, in the form of Matthew effects², if the impact of the other factors mentioned above are not taken into account adequately (Boudon, 1977). This situation calls for better insight into the patterns of school use among families of children with special needs, as well as the related determinants.

This paper focuses on how parent's social position is related to the use of different educational settings by children with special educational needs in Flanders (the northern region of Belgium). In line with the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), we recognise that 'those with special (educational) needs are defined by the additional public and/or private resources provided to support their education (personnel, material and financial resources)' (OECD, 2005). We focus on pupils with disabilities or impairments that are considered organic disorders attributable to organic pathologies (in medical terms), as well as on those with behavioural or emotional disorders, or specific difficulties in learning. Family factors (the socioeconomic and socio-cultural characteristics of the family) are the main content variables used in the research. We test if the

¹ The use of education services is not a single, one-time yes/no decision; it fits within a pattern of practices and people consulted and is influenced by past decisions. (Pescosolido, 2001).

² The "Matthew effect" refers to the phenomenon, widely observed across advanced welfare states, that the middle classes tend to be the main beneficiaries of social benefits and services (Deleeck et al. 1983; Merton 1968).

hypothesis that, in the Flemish context, family characteristics are not related to the use of educational settings designed for children with special educational needs (special education or integrated education), can be disproved.

Before describing the influence of these family factors, we first provide an outline of the Flemish education system. The paper presents a study in a specific social and educational context. In Belgium, each community (Dutch speaking community, French speaking community and German speaking community) has its own education system. The ministries of education in the individual language communities are responsible for the different aspects of education policy, but the education systems run along very similar lines for each of the communities. Within each community there are three types of educational institutions: community education funded by the state and organised by the relevant ministry of education, subsidized public schools organised by the provinces and municipalities and subsidized private schools including Catholic schools as well as Jewish, Protestant, Islamic, Orthodox and Method schools like Steiner and Montessori. Special needs education is also spread over the different communities and types of educational institution in the form of special schools (eight types)³ or integrated education. Freedom of education is a constitutional right in Belgium. Every natural or legal person has the right to organize education and establish institutions for this purpose. The school boards enjoy considerable autonomy, but schools that want government recognition or funding must meet the attainment targets (Eurydice, 2009-2010a; Eurydice, 2009-2010b; Eurydice Flemish Community, 2010). There is a similar set up in several other sectors like the Flemish care and childcare sector.

2. The Flemish educational context

Since the 1990s, Flemish policymakers have been attempting to reduce or eliminate the existing inequalities in the educational system in general. In 1999 the government chose to begin investing in a policy for equal opportunities in education, meaning that discrimination on the basis of gender, ethnicity, sexual preference or disability was to be outlawed. In addition, education is seen as an important tool in the fight against the development of a dual society characterised by social class. In 2002, the

³ Type 1: children with mild intellectual disabilities; Type 2: children with moderate or severe intellectual disabilities; Type 3: children with serious emotional and/or behavioural problems; Type 4: children with physical disabilities; Type 5: children admitted to hospital or in quarantine for medical reasons; Type 6: children with visual impairments; Type 7: children with hearing impairments; Type 8: children with serious learning difficulties

intention to remove barriers in education was manifested in a decree on equal opportunities in education, whose purpose is to eliminate discrimination and enhance social mix and cohesion. Extra resources are now granted to schools attended by a certain percentage of children whose mothers' education level is low, children whose families are on the social minimum wage and children who speak a different language at home (Ghesquière, Mercken, Avau, & Petri, 2007; Van Rompu, Mardulier, De Coninck, Van Beeumen, & Exter, 2007). Concrete measures for children with disabilities or impairments were excluded from this decree, however, requiring that a separate regulation be drawn up later.

Flanders has a long history of using the segregated system of special schools, with an entirely autonomous branch of special schools in use since 1970. In the past decade, the Flemish community has taken a leading position with regard to the education of pupils with special needs in segregated settings and 84% of Flemish school-aged children with a disability now go to special schools (European Agency of Special Needs and Inclusive Education, 2012). The law of February 1997 on primary education incorporates both mainstream and special education in a single legal framework, which describes special education as a system that offers adapted education, care and therapy to pupils whose personal development cannot be ensured by mainstream education, whether temporarily or permanently. Triggered by the impetus of the integration movement, integrated education (*[Geïntegreerd onderwijs]* or GON) was established in Flemish legislation in 1980: As a form of cooperation between regular and special schools, teachers and other professionals working in special schools now provide additional support to pupils with special needs who attend mainstream schools (Bossaert, 2012). The funding of integrated education is organised in such a way that mainstream schools receive funding for a small number of extra support hours from teachers and therapists.

Access to such integrated support is based on the typology used within the special education system. Depending on the type of special education concerned, it applies primarily to children and adolescents who have physical, visual or auditory impairments. Students with socio-emotional disorders, learning difficulties and moderate intellectual disabilities are eligible for such integrated support only after having participated in the special education system for at least nine months. The enrolment of these children in integrated education is therefore very low. Pupils with a moderate or severe intellectual disability have no access to the system of integrated education. The nature and amount of additional aid that children receive depends upon the type and severity of their disabilities, but the majority of pupils receive two hours of additional support per week for two school years at each educational level. In the last decade, the number of pupils enrolled in the integrated education system has increased significantly. A large proportion of this increase is due to the increasing amount of students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) in

integrated education⁴ (Vandenbroucke, 2007). However, the overall number of children with special educational needs has remained small: 1.1% of the Flemish school population in school year 2010-2011 (Internal Affairs of the Flemish government, 2008). So, most resources for special needs education are used within the separate system of special education.

Pupils with ASD or auditory impairments are most strongly represented in integrated education, followed by pupils with a physical disability. Of the children with ASD or auditory impairments, 71% attend a regular primary school while also receiving support from the special school (integrated education); this number drops to 60% for primary school pupils with a visual disability and to 56% for primary school pupils with a physical disability (Flemish Ministry of Education data for school year 2010-2011). The transfer of pupils from special schools to integrated education remains limited. The majority of pupils with special educational needs in integrated education began their school careers in mainstream or integrated education. The transfer of pupils from integrated education to special schools remains rather high (20% to 30%) both for pupils who receive a limited amount of additional aid from the special school (pupils with a moderate disability and pupils with an intellectual disability) and for pupils with a severe disability (who receive no limited amount of additional aid from the special school).

Although this form of cooperation between special and mainstream schools was initially introduced as a means of integrating students with special needs without making changes to the curriculum, a smaller programme designed to include students with moderate to severe intellectual disabilities in regular schools (Inclusive Education [*Inclusief Onderwijs*] or ION) was established and made available to a limited number of pupils in 1999. The severity of the disabilities in question required that adaptations be made to the mainstream curriculum (based on the equivalence principle) and this is one of the key themes of the inclusion debate. ION has since been extended to a total of 100 pupils with moderate or severe intellectual disabilities. Clearly, this remains a small-scale initiative.

⁴ Autism spectrum disorders do not feature within the current special education typology. They are mainly situated in type 7 of special education and type 1 of special education. The Flemish government recently agreed upon the implementation of a decree that establishes a new type of special education for children with autism spectrum disorders: type 9 of special education.

3. Method

3.1. Data

The data and results presented in this article were derived from two databases. First, we analysed data from the Flemish Families and Care Survey (FFCS) database, which was realised as part of the 'Care for young children in Flanders' project and involved a large-scale survey of 2,821 families in which the youngest child was under 15 years old. Data were gathered by means of face-to-face interviews carried out between November 2004 and June 2005 by experienced investigators who were familiar with the CAPI⁵ method. The research project was approved by the Belgian commission for protection of the privacy. All data were made anonymous.

There is an overrepresentation of families with a child with special needs in the sample which was determined by administrative sampling from the database of the Flemish Agency for People with Disabilities (which is an official classification of people with a disability but does not include all types of special education). To compile our sample of families with a child with special needs, we started from the families selected from the Flemish Agency for People with Disabilities. These were complemented with the families that answered affirmative to the following question: 'Does the child have special needs?'. The researchers used a broad definition of the concept 'children with special needs':

A child with special needs is a child that needs more care and guidance than most children of his/her age because he/she has physical, intellectual or emotional problems or because there are problems with his/her behaviour or development. (Ghysels & Debacker, 2007).

This database gave us information about the socioeconomic situations of 963 children with special needs in Flanders and described the type of education used by the child with special needs in the family: mainstream education (mainstream and integrated education) or special education. The variables used to define the social position of the family of the child were the mother's educational level, the mother's working situation and the family's partner situation. The variables used to define the characteristics of the child were the age of the child with special needs, the gender of the child with special needs and the severity of the disability.

The second database used consists of a list of all the Flemish pupils in primary education for school year 2010-2011. The database (further

⁵ Computer-assisted personal interviewing.

called FME) was provided by the Flemish Ministry of Education. Information on 413,488 pupils is available in the database. The variables used were: variables representing characteristics of the child (gender, age and nationality), a variable defining the socioeconomic position of the family (whether the family of the child receives a school allowance) and control variables that give information about the school of the child (number of children at the school, province of the school and education network of the school). The dependant variable used for the analyses was the school type (whether the child attends a mainstream school, a special school or a mainstream school with additional aid from a special school (integrated or inclusive education)). Only for pupils attending mainstream schools, the database included three additional variables defining the social position of the family: Whether the mother of the pupil has a low level of education (no secondary education qualification); whether the pupil speaks a language other than Dutch at home; and whether the child lives in a disadvantaged neighbourhood. All data were made anonymous by the Ministry of Education and a deontological code was signed by the researchers.

3.2. Statistical Analysis

On the FFCS database, we performed several descriptive analyses and a binary logistic regression analysis to identify possible correlations between family characteristics and the school use of a child with special needs. The analyses were done on a sub-file only containing the families with a child with special needs as recognised by the Flemish Agency for People with Disabilities. This sub-file included family information of 537 children with special needs. The addition of a weighting variable allowed us to create a representative picture of information for this group of children in Flanders. Three criteria were used as references for the weighting: Family size, age of youngest child and sampling stratum.

On the FME database we performed descriptive analyses and binary logistic regression analyses carried out with school type as the dependent variable. Interaction effects were tested and significant effects were included in the model. Table 1 describes the numbers and percentages of the main dependant and independent variables used in the study of both databases.

Table 1. Descriptives of the main variables

		FME database				FFCS database		
		Full sample	Mainstream education	Integrated education	Special education	Full sample*	Mainstream +integrated	Special education
N/n		412,116	379,148	4,811	28,157	523	225	298
%		100%	92%	1.17%	6.8%	100%	43%	57%
gender	Male	210,197 51%	188,877 49.8%	3,613 75.1%	17,707 62.9%	347 66.3%	151 67.1%	196 65.6%
	Female	201,919 49%	190,271 50.2%	1,198 24.9%	10,450 37.1%	176 33.7%	74 32.9%	102 34.2%
nationality	Belgian	384,137 93.2%	353,289 93.2%	4,668 97%	26,180 93%		/	/
	Non-Belgian	27,979 6.8%	25,859 6.8%	143 3%	1,977 7%		/	/
School allowance	Yes	101,678 24.7%	88,359 23.2%	1,047 21.8%	12,272 43.6%		/	/
	no	310,438 75.7%	290,789 76.7%	3,764 78.2%	15,885 56.4%		/	/
Diploma mother	No higher secondary	82,410 21.5%	81,694 21.5%	716 15.1%	/	168 35.2%	60 28.4%	108 40.7%
	Higher secondary or higher	301,483 78.5%	297,454 78.5%	4,029 84.9%	/	309 64.8%	152 71.6%	157 59.3%
Partner situation	Couple	/**	/	/	/	375 72.7%	172 76.4%	203 69.8%
	single	/	/	/	/	141 27.3%	53 23.6%	88 30.2%

*sample with only children with special needs

** no information available in the dataset

4. Results

The following sections present the findings produced by analyses of the FFCS database and the FME database, describing the correlation between the socioeconomic situation of the child's family and enrolment in certain types of school.

4.1. The social position of pupils in special education

Analyses carried out on the FFCS database show that as the educational level of the mother decreased, the use of a special school increased. We found that, of the children with special needs whose mother had a university degree or higher education qualification, 55.5% attended a mainstream school. Only 33.3% of children with special needs attended a mainstream school when the mother's level of education was primary education or less. The partner situation in the family was also found to correlate with the use of special education. 61.5% ($p < .046$) of pupils with special needs from single-parent families attended a special school, in

comparison with 52.9% of children with special needs from two-parent families.

Table 2. Binary logistic regression analysis: use of mainstream education (0) or special education (1) by children with special needs in Flanders.

	B	Sig.	Exp(B) Sub-file
Mother's educational level (reference category = primary education or less)		.044	
Lower secondary education	-.095	.781	.909
Higher secondary education	-.465	.142	.628
Higher education	-.800	.017	.449
Single mother	.140	.545	1.151
Mother's working situation (reference category = full time)		.369	
Part time working mother	.026	.927	1.026
Unemployed mother	-.281	.295	.755
Age of the child	.120	.000	1.127
Male child	-.043	.836	.958
Severity of the disability (reference category = mild)		.059	
Moderate disability	.555	.150	1.741
Severe disability	.813	.024	2.255
Constant	-1.112	.047	.329

Note: Source FFCS database

The results of a binary logistic regression analysis presented in table 2 confirm that, when controlling for gender and age of the child and severity of the disability of the child, the use of special education by pupils with special needs decreased with increasing educational level of the mother. Pupils with special needs with a mother with a university degree or higher education qualification were less likely to attend a special school than pupils with special needs with a mother whose level of education was primary education or less (OR= 0.449, $p < .017$). The effects of partner situation and the mother's working situation were not significant. The findings also indicate that the likelihood of attending a special school increased along with the age of the child (OR= 1.127, $p < .000$). Third, the results demonstrate that the likelihood of attending a special school was higher when the child has a severe disability (OR= 2.255, $p < .024$) than when the child has a mild disability.

Table 3. Binary logistic regression analysis: use of mainstream (GON included) primary school (0) or special primary school (1) by children (with and without special needs) in Flanders, school year 2010-2011

	B	S.E.	Sig.	Exp(B)	Stand(B)
Girl	-.876	.073	.000	.416	-0.24
Age	-.470	.037	.000	.625	-0.46
Age^2	.042	.002	.000	1.043	
Girl*age	.038	.008	.000	1.039	
Province of school (reference category = Antwerp)			.000		
Flemish Brabant	-.450	.021	.000	.637	-0.34
West Flanders	-.383	.020	.000	.682	-0.29
East Flanders	-.155	.019	.000	.857	-0.12
Limburg	-.164	.022	.000	.849	-0.12
Education network school (reference category= community education)			.000		
Subsidized private schools	-.330	.018	.000	.719	-0.11
Subsidized public schools	-.706	.023	.000	.494	-0.23
Number of children at the school	-.012	.000	.000	.988	-0.85
Family receives a school allowance	.795	.014	.000	2.214	-0.18
Pupil has foreign nationality	-.330	.061	.000	.719	-0.04
Foreign nationality*school allowance	-.492	.053	.000	.611	
Foreign nationality*education network			.000		
Foreign nationality*free subsidised education	.323	.067	.000	1.381	
Foreign nationality*official subsidised education	.797	.076	.000	2.219	
Constant	1.617	.169	.000	5.037	

Reference category = mainstream primary school

Cox & Snell R square = 0.108 ; Nagelkerke R square = 0.274

Note: Source FME database

The regression analysis presented in Table 3 (including all pupils in primary education school year 2010-2011, regardless special educational needs) shows that, when controlling for gender, age, nationality, province of the school, education network and number of children at the school, pupils from families in a weaker position financially (as indicated by whether or not they received a school allowance) were more likely to attend a special school than pupils from families in a stronger financial position. This effect was less distinct for pupils with a non-Belgian nationality. This effect remained even when we focused only on pupils with special educational needs (as described in Table 4) but descriptive analyses showed variation according to type of special education. Half of the children with a mild intellectual disability came from families receiving a school allowance. This number fell to 45.4% for pupils with a moderate to severe intellectual disability in special education and again to 42.3% for pupils with serious emotional or behavioural problems in special

education. On average, one third of families enrolled in the other types of special education (see note 3) were found to receive a school allowance.

Table 4. Binary logistic regression analysis: use of special primary education (0) or integrated primary education (1) by children with special needs in Flanders, school year 2010-2011

	B	S.E.	Sig.	Exp(B)	Stand(B)
Girl	-.528	.039	.000	.590	-0.14
Age	.096	.096	.319	1.100	0.09
Age^2	-.018	.005	.001	.982	
Province of school (reference category = Antwerp)			.000		
Flemish Brabant	.375	.056	.000	1.455	0.29
West Flanders	.438	.058	.000	1.550	0.33
East Flanders	.512	.050	.000	1.668	0.39
Limburg	-.244	.060	.000	.784	-0.18
Education network school (reference category = community education)			.000		
Subsidized private schools	1.234	.062	.000	3.434	0.41
Subsidized public schools	1.613	.072	.000	5.017	0.53
Number of pupils at the school	.009	.000	.000	1.009	0.64
Family receives a school allowance	-.543	.086	.000	.581	-0.12
Pupil has foreign nationality	-.607	.094	.000	.545	-0.08
School allowance*education network			.000		
School allowance* subsidised private schools	-.381	.102	.000	.684	
School allowance* subsidised public schools	-.388	.124	.002	.679	
Constant	-4.165	.427	.000	.016	

Reference category = special primary education

Cox & Snell R square = 0.164 ; Nagelkerke R square = 0.290

Note: Source FME database

So the results show that the use of a school type for children with special needs (integrated or special education) is determined systematically by the social position of the family of the child; besides the influence of other characteristics like type and severity of the disability and age of the child.

4.2. The social profile of pupils in integrated education within the mainstream primary school population

We compared the social position of families of pupils with special educational needs in integrated education with the social position of families of pupils in mainstream education (Table 5). The results of the analyses on the FME database show that pupils in integrated education tend to have a stronger social profile than other pupils in mainstream education. Pupils whose mother has a low education level, pupils with non-Belgian nationality and pupils who speak a different language than Dutch at home were less represented in integrated education. Interestingly, the negative effect of nationality on the use of integrated education was less strong for girls than for boys. The effect of the 'school allowance' factor was less straightforward than the effects of the other variables. Descriptive analyses revealed a negative effect (receiving a school allowance decreased the likelihood of the child's being in integrated education), but when control variables were added in a regression analysis, the effect became slightly positive – except among pupils living in an underprivileged neighbourhood. However, when we focused only on pupils with special educational needs, there was a strong negative effect. Pupils with special educational needs from families in stronger financial positions were more likely to be enrolled in integrated education than those from families in weaker financial positions (see Table 4).

Table 5. Binary logistic regression analysis: use of mainstream primary education (0) or integrated primary education (1) by children in Flanders, school year 2010-2011

	B	S.E.	Sig.	Exp(B)	Stand(B)
Girl	-1.114	.034	.000	.328	-0.3
Age	.070	.008	.000	1.073	0.06
Province of school (reference category = Antwerp)			.000		
Flemish Brabant	-.263	.045	.000	.769	-0.2
West Flanders	-.407	.048	.000	.666	-0.3
East Flanders	-.026	.039	.507	.974	-0.02
Limburg	-.156	.049	.001	.855	-0.12
Education network school (reference category = community education)			.000		
Subsidized private schools	-.390	.040	.000	.677	-0.13
Subsidized public schools	-.295	.047	.000	.744	-0.09
Number of pupils in the school	-.001	.000	.000	.999	-0.07
Family receives a school allowance	.180	.042	.000	1.197	0.04
Pupil has foreign nationality	-.644	.106	.000	.525	-0.08
child lives in a disadvantaged neighbourhood	-.038	.046	.408	.962	-0.008
Pupil speaks a language other than Dutch at home	-.783	.067	.000	.457	-0.15
Mother has no secondary education qualification	-.289	.044	.000	.749	-0.06
School allowance*disadvantaged neighbourhood	-.312	.083	.000	.732	
Girl*foreign nationality	.401	.182	.027	1.494	
Constant	-3.716	.093	.000	.024	

Reference category = mainstream primary education

Cox & Snell R square = 0.005 ; Nagelkerke R square = 0.042

Note: Source FME database

5. Discussion

This study aimed to contribute to the literature on social reproduction in education and the education of children with special educational needs in mainstream schools. This discussion tries to give some possible explanations for the results found.

The theory of Bourdieu (1979) states that differences in cultural capital are responsible for social inequality in education. Each status group has particular lifestyle characteristics and in order to function adequately in the education system it is necessary to be at ease in the culture of the dominant status group. Bourdieu based his theory on empirical research carried out on French universities in the 1960s, where academic culture was dominant, and found that knowledge of and familiarity with this dominant culture was necessary to succeed. Bourdieu asserted that this type of knowledge is passed from generation to generation and that social position therefore determines school success: Students who are not familiar with the dominant culture are filtered out of the education system. Whenever there is a conflict between the school culture and the

home culture, subtle forms of selection and self-selection arise. Today, the definition of cultural capital has changed. Within the current neoliberal education system, which is characterised by free school choice and the resulting competition among schools, it are self-producing, self-regulating, autonomous pupils who are most likely to succeed. Pupils that are known to do best in this type of school culture (defined by schools aiming to achieve high output with a minimum of resources) are the pupils who have broad knowledge, the ability to search for information and independent study skills (Goodley, 2011). This school culture is consistent with the values and culture of families characterised by a higher socioeconomic status, who value achievement resulting from competences gained through effort (Szumski & Karwowski, 2012). We looked at how differences in school use defined by social position occur in a subpart of the education system, the special needs education. Knowing that there are qualitative good special schools in Flanders and that mainstream and integrated schools are more demanding than special schools⁶ (Connor & Ferri, 2007) we explored the influence of the social position of the parents of the pupils with special needs on school outcomes and pupil selection (Van der Velden, 1994).

5.1. Duality within the Flemish education system

Research has shown that inequality in the Flemish education system – including nursery, primary, secondary and higher education – remains high. Toddlers from lower social classes start their school careers later and are at higher risk of lagging behind at school. Children of non-working parents and single parents participate less in nursery education and are also at higher risk of lagging behind. Social inequality continues throughout primary education and increases in secondary education (Groenez, Van den Brande, & Nicaise, 2003). The existing structural inequalities in education also influence the type of education used by children with special educational needs. Although integrated education was established by law as an option in 1980, special schools remain the primary educational institution for children with special educational needs in the Flemish community of Belgium. Currently, parents are mainly the ones to take the initiative in choosing inclusion in mainstream schools. So they need to have the necessary knowledge and social skills to contravene the prevailing referral to special education. They need to have sufficient knowledge of the educational rights of their child with special needs. Furthermore, the family must have the necessary organizational capacities both to provide and seek out extra support (Vloeberghs, 2008). There are

⁶ There is no common curriculum in special schools. Pupils in special schools have an individualized curriculum that is adapted to the needs and possibilities of each pupil. The development objectives are autonomously selected by the school.

also socioeconomic factors of influence besides the socio-cultural factors in choosing for integrated education. Research indicates that many of the costs of integrated education fall to the family, since the support services surrounding children with special educational needs are not structurally included within the school and this puts pressure on families (Schraepen, Lebeer, & Vanpeperstraete, 2010). All this is reflected in the result section in a stronger socio-cultural and socio-economic profile of families who opt for integrated education for their child with special educational needs today, indicating an existing duality within the education for children with special educational needs. Our findings are coherent with previous studies in other countries (e.g., Szumski & Karwowski, 2012; Turner, Alborz, & Gayle, 2008; Leyser & Kirk, 2004) .

5.2. The complexity of and disincentives within the education system create social inequality

Analyses carried out on our data showed that pupils from social vulnerable families are overrepresented in special schools. This correlation between social status and the use of special education has been confirmed by previous studies in the field (Ruelens et al., 2007; Groenez et al., 2003; Ghesquière et al., 2007). Special schools work as a kind of safety net for pupils who have difficulties in mainstream education for whatever reason. Lower costs, arranged transport, better accessibility and more individual approach of special schools are motivating factors for parents in deprived situations to enrol their children in the segregated system in Flanders (Ruelens et al., 2007).

Despite the clarity of the findings described above, it is important to bear in mind the correlation between social position and disability when interpreting the results. A marked class gradient is evident, with a much higher prevalence of children with special needs in more disadvantaged social class categories (Roulstone & Prideaux, 2012). Several factors contribute to this situation. First, the parents of children with disabilities tend to have educational levels that are lower than average (OECD, 2010). Lower-than-average education leads to lower-than-average work intensity, which is a second factor contributing to weaker socio-economic circumstances. Third, children with disabilities are disproportionately more likely to live in single-parent households (Sebrechts & Breda, 2012). It is clear, then, that some aspects of the overrepresentation of children from disadvantaged families in special schools can be explained by the correlations between social position and health (Hibel, Farkas, & Morgan, 2010). However, our research results show an unequal use of different types of schools within the group children with special needs. This is in line with the research of Van der Velden (1994) that indicates that a large portion of the unequal enrolment in special schools can also be explained

by factors and processes that emerge after the child's school career has already begun. In this way, the system itself generates inequality.

6. Limitations

Inevitably, this study has a number of limitations that should be acknowledged. First, using the FFCS data meant that we were restricted to basing our study on non-longitudinal data and this is something that future research could expand on. It is also important to bear in mind that the 'child with special needs in the family' variable is partly subjective, which may have resulted in bias. Second, no distinction in type of disability was made. Third, the reader must be attentive to the fact that the variables used to represent the social position of the family in the FME database is limited to the variables 'school allowance' and 'nationality of the child' to compare children in special education with children in mainstream education or integrated education. Finally, though disproportional placement in special education by cultural and social status differences is indicated by much of the research, there is some disconfirming research as indicated in the article of Szumski and Karwowski (2012). Depending on the nature of the disability, the effect of social factors on education use can be different.

7. Conclusion: Recurring Matthew effects

While the Flemish education sector has begun to evolve alongside international developments towards more inclusive types of education for children with disabilities, the segregated special school remains the dominant model and a valued type of education in Flanders. However, a key advantage of the Flemish system is that parents of children with special needs are currently able to choose the educational setting that is most suitable for their children: integrated education or segregated special education. This choice is however complex and influenced by many factors besides the severity and nature of the disability. Our research disproves the hypothesis that family characteristics are unrelated to the use of a particular educational setting for children with special educational needs, resulting in Matthew effects in the education system for children with special educational needs.

The initiatives for inclusive education implemented to date in the Flemish community of Belgium appear to rely heavily on the capacities of the families with the result that families in stronger socio-cultural and socioeconomic positions are best able to cope in integrated education. At the same time, there remains an overrepresentation of vulnerable families in segregated specialist education. So policies aimed at increasing equality serve to exacerbate the embedded structural social inequalities. Because

of this conclusion, more intensive research into the mechanisms which create social inequalities is necessary. Government, policies and those who would implement policy may not neglect the adverse side effects and need to be aware that the education structures themselves serve to self perpetuate inequalities.

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